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Exploring the Strategies of Secondary English Teachers in Enhancing Students' Literacy Skills: A Case Study

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Abstract

Background and Aim: Literacy underachievement remains a persistent problem in Philippine basic education, with Filipino learners ranking among the lowest in the 2018 PISA reading comprehension results (Librea et al., 2023). While much existing research quantifies the effectiveness of individual literacy strategies through experimental designs, comparatively few qualitative studies explore how secondary English teachers themselves experience, select, and adapt these strategies within their own classrooms. This case study addresses that gap by exploring the strategies secondary English teachers employ to enhance their students' literacy skills, and the reasoning behind these strategies, within a single Philippine public secondary school.

Materials and Methods: A single bounded qualitative case study design was employed, with the case defined as the group of eight English teachers at Tambulig National High School, Tambulig District, treated as one bounded unit of analysis. Participants were purposively selected based on current English teaching assignment, active engagement in literacy instruction, and at least three years of teaching experience. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Cebuanong Binisaya using a guide validated by three experts, then transcribed, translated into English, and validated through member checking. Data were analyzed following Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) case study procedures, involving familiarization, coding, thematic categorization, and interpretation.

Results: Five interrelated themes emerged, corresponding to the study's Input-Process-Output conceptual framework: (1) input factors, including students' persistent literacy needs and teachers' varied professional backgrounds; (2) strategies employed, converging around structured reading, writing, and vocabulary approaches; (3) the influence of pedagogical content knowledge, ranging from theory-articulated to experience-derived adaptation; (4) challenges encountered, including mixed-ability classrooms, time constraints, and insufficient materials, met through collaborative and resourceful coping mechanisms; and (5) outcomes, reflecting genuine but uneven gains in students' comprehension, writing, and confidence.

Conclusion: Secondary teachers enhance their students' literacy skills through a structured, adaptive process shaped by persistent input constraints and sustained through individual resourcefulness, but this process appears to reach a practical ceiling absent broader institutional support. The study recommends institutionalizing shared literacy frameworks, structural support for mixed-ability instruction, a school-based materials bank, and institutional investment as a necessary precondition for durable, school-wide literacy improvement.

Keywords: Literacy Strategies; Secondary Teachers; Pedagogical Content Knowledge; Reading Comprehension; Philippine Education

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Introduction

Reading and writing well is supposed to be one of the basic promises of going to school. Yet for a large share of children worldwide, that promise is not being kept. In low- and middle-income countries, more than half of all ten-year-olds still cannot read a simple text with comprehension, even though over 90% of them are enrolled in school (Crawford et al., 2024). Sitting in a classroom, in other words, does not automatically translate into learning to read. The same pattern holds more broadly: across the globe, more than half of all children and adolescents fall short of even minimal benchmarks in reading and numeracy (Pocaan et al., 2022).

The Philippines sits near the bottom of this global picture. When the 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) measured reading comprehension across 79 countries, Filipino students ranked last (Librea et al., 2023). Scores crept up slightly by the 2022 cycle, but the country remained close to the bottom of the rankings (Esteban et al., 2024). These numbers are not evenly distributed either; students from low-income households and rural schools tend to fare worse, partly because rural schools often lack the infrastructure and materials that urban schools take for granted (Gatcho et al., 2024; Idulog et al., 2023). The pandemic years made this worse, as modular learning disrupted the reading practice students would otherwise have built up (Idulog et al., 2023). Government responses, such as Every Child a Reader Program, exist on paper, but implementation has been uneven, hampered by weak monitoring at the ground level (Librea et al., 2023).

It is secondary teachers who are left to work with the consequences of this gap on a daily basis. Long before researchers can design interventions or policymakers can allocate funding, it is the classroom teacher who has to decide, lesson by lesson, how to help a struggling reader keep up. A body of research has begun documenting what these teachers actually do: explicit strategy instruction, scaffolding, differentiated instruction, and structured pre- and post-reading routines all appear across studies of secondary literacy teaching (Graham et al., 2023; Lagdaan & Sevilla, 2025; Wendaferew & Damtew, 2023). But knowing a strategy exists is different from knowing how to use it well. That gap is where pedagogical content knowledge becomes relevant: the blend of subject-matter expertise and pedagogical judgment that allows a teacher to match the right strategy to the right student at the right moment (Aguye & Berlie, 2024; König et al., 2022).

None of this happens under ideal conditions, however. Across different countries, secondary English teachers describe strikingly similar obstacles: not enough training, not enough materials, not enough time, and classrooms full of students at very different reading levels (Bhowmik & Kim, 2021; Msuya & Abdala, 2025; Nurkamto et al., 2021). Philippine teachers echo this directly, reporting an ongoing, unmet need for professional development in how to teach reading and how to use assessment data to guide instruction (Ligudon & Ildefonso, 2022; Rosano et al., 2025).

Much of what we know about which strategies "work" comes from studies that measure outcomes through experiments and quasi-experiments (Magableh & Abdullah, 2021; Saleh, 2021). What is missing is the teacher's own account of that process, why a particular strategy was chosen over another, how it was adapted on the fly, and what it felt like to work within the constraints described above. This study takes up that gap. Using Shulman's (1986) theory of pedagogical content knowledge as a lens, it explores, in the words of the teachers themselves, how secondary English teachers go about enhancing their students' literacy skills.

Objectives

This study generally aimed to explore the strategies of secondary English teachers in enhancing the literacy skills of their students. This was conducted during the academic year 2025 - 2026. The study answered the central question: *"What are the strategies employed by secondary teachers in enhancing the literacy skills of their students?"*

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What input factors (teacher background, experience, and students' literacy needs) shape the strategies secondary teachers use to enhance literacy skills?
2. What specific strategies do secondary teachers employ to enhance students' reading, writing, and comprehension skills?

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3. How do secondary teachers' pedagogical content knowledge influence their selection and adaptation of these literacy strategies?
4. What challenges do secondary teachers encounter in implementing these strategies, and how do they navigate them?
5. What outcomes do teachers perceive as resulting from their literacy enhancement strategies?

Conceptual Framework

This study is anchored on the Input-Process-Output (IPO) model, paired with Shulman's (1986) theory of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) as the lens for understanding what happens inside the "Process" stage. Figure 1 illustrates how these two frameworks work together, and how the study's five research questions map onto them.

The Input stage covers what teachers and students bring into the classroom before any strategy is chosen: the teacher's professional background and experience, and the specific literacy needs and gaps their students present. This corresponds to the study's first research question. These inputs matter because they set the starting conditions a teacher has to work with; a teacher cannot select a strategy in the abstract; the choice is always a response to a particular group of students with particular needs.

The Process stage is where the actual work of teaching happens, and it is deliberately broken down into three parts in this study rather than treated as a single undifferentiated stage. First, there is the strategy itself, what the teacher actually does in the classroom (research question two). Second, there is the reasoning behind that choice, the pedagogical content knowledge that lets a teacher judge which strategy fits which student, which text, and which learning goal (research question three). Shulman's theory is used specifically here because it explains that effective teaching is not just knowing a strategy exists, but knowing how to adapt it based on an integration of subject-matter knowledge and pedagogical judgment. Third, this process does not unfold smoothly; it is constantly shaped by the barriers teachers face and the ways they work around them (research question four). Separating strategy, reasoning, and barriers into three distinct research questions, rather than collapsing them into one broad "process" question, is what allows the study to capture not just what teachers do, but why they do it and what gets in the way.

The Output stage is the perceived result of this entire process: the literacy gains teachers observe in their students (research question five). Because this study relies on teachers' own interview accounts rather than standardized test data, this output is understood as teachers' perceived outcomes, not as an independently measured or verified improvement in student performance.

Altogether, the five research questions are not five separate, unrelated themes; they are what happens when the three IPO stages are unpacked in enough detail to actually answer "how" and "why," not just "what." Input feeds into Process; Process is examined through its strategy, reasoning, and constraint components; and the result is Output, closing the loop the framework describes.

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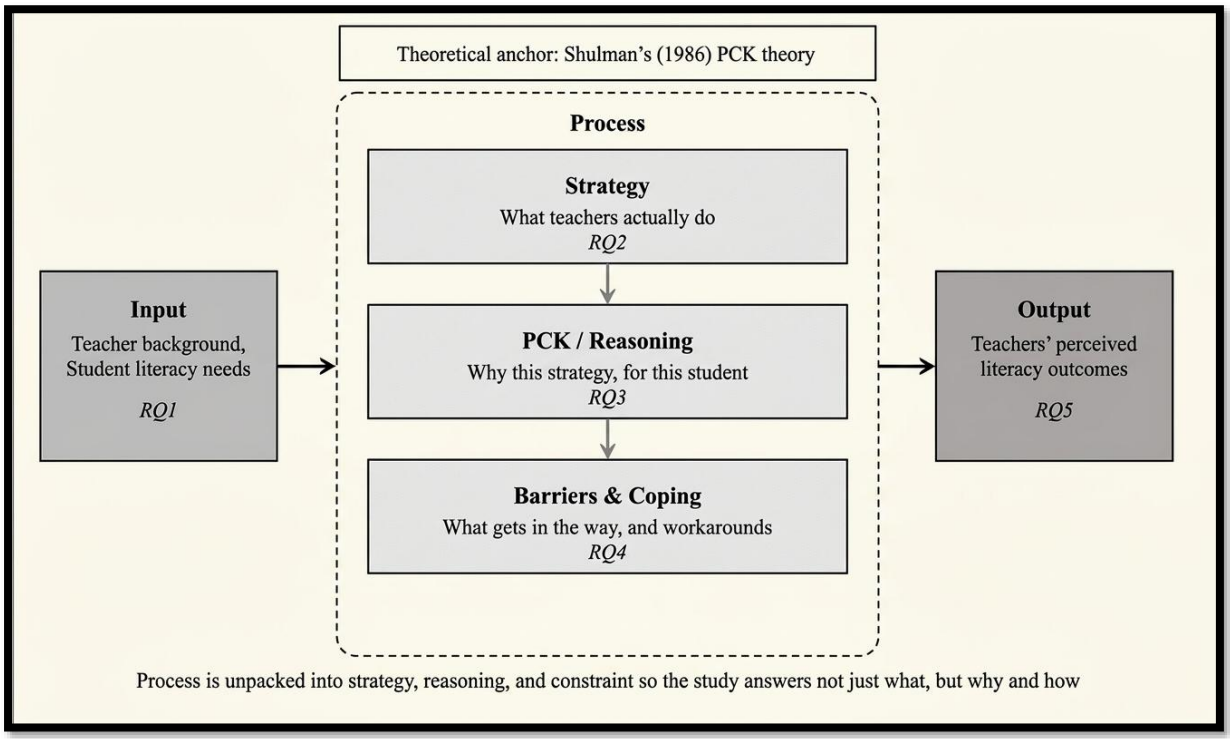


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Secondary English Teachers' Strategies in Enhancing Literacy Skills

Literature Review

Global and Philippine Literacy Landscape

The scale of the global literacy problem is easy to state and hard to absorb: over half a million pupils across 48 low- and middle-income countries are not learning to decode text at a basic level, and the gap between what they can read and what their grade level expects only grows wider each year they stay in school (Crawford et al., 2024). This is not simply a matter of poor countries versus rich ones, either; disparities can be just as stark within a single nation. In West Papua, Indonesia, roughly 30% of indigenous adults are illiterate, nearly ten times the national average of 3.5%, a gap researchers trace to geographic isolation and chronic teacher absenteeism rather than any single policy failure (Yawan, 2022).

The Philippines belongs squarely inside this picture, and in some respects sits toward the worse end of it. When PISA measured reading comprehension in 2018, Filipino 15-year-olds scored a mean of 340, trailing far behind the United States (505) and Belgium (493) (Esteban et al., 2024; Pocaan et al., 2022). By the 2022 cycle, the score had inched up to 347, but this barely moved the country's position near the bottom of the international rankings (Esteban et al., 2024). The pattern repeats in science literacy: only 23% of Filipino students met the baseline proficiency level, compared to 78% across OECD countries (Bernardo et al., 2023).

These numbers are not distributed evenly across the population. Students from low-income households are considerably more likely to struggle with reading (Idulog et al., 2023), and the divide between rural and urban schools compounds this further; rural schools often lack the modernized infrastructure and reading materials that urban schools can draw on (Gatcho et al., 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic did not create these problems, but it made them worse: the shift to modular distance learning, combined with increased screen time, disrupted the reading practice students would otherwise have accumulated (Idulog et al., 2023). World Bank data puts a hard number on the resulting gap: only 10 to 22 percent of Filipino pupils in Grades 4, 5, and 9 scored at or above minimal competency across global assessments (Pocaan et al., 2022). And the consequences reach beyond the classroom: over half of Filipinos aged 15 to 70 report limited health literacy, suggesting that gaps in foundational reading

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skills eventually show up as reduced functional literacy in everyday, practical domains (Tolabing et al., 2022). Government responses exist, Every Child a Reader Program being the most visible, but implementation has consistently fallen short due to weak monitoring and follow-through at the school level (Librea et al., 2023), leaving the country's Sustainable Development Goal 4 commitments on quality education still largely unmet.

Secondary Teachers' Literacy Enhancement Strategies

Secondary teachers draw on a broad repertoire of strategies to strengthen reading, writing, and comprehension, with evidence spanning explicit strategy instruction, structured reading frameworks, and technology-enhanced approaches (Lagdaan & Sevilla, 2025; Graham et al., 2023; Wendaferew & Damtew, 2023). For reading comprehension specifically, teachers commonly organize instruction around pre-, during-, and post-reading stages, with students generating questions before reading and identifying main ideas during reading (Ligudon & Ildefonso, 2022; Dugasa et al., 2022). Frequently reported techniques include scaffolding, think-aloud modeling, the Question-Answer Relationship (QAR) technique, skimming and scanning, mind mapping, and reciprocal teaching (Apoko & Marcellinda, 2023; Nurdianingsih, 2021; Fitria et al., 2024). Critical Reading Strategies, which involve pre-scanning texts, evaluating authors' arguments, and comparing related texts, have been shown to improve both comprehension and reading motivation among ninth-grade students (Gebremariam & Weldeyohannes, 2025).

Writing instruction has likewise been shown to strengthen literacy outcomes more broadly. A large-scale meta-analysis of over 52,000 students in grades 6–12 found that writing instruction improved both writing performance and reading comprehension, with the strongest effects produced by inquiry-based writing, grammar instruction, and strategy instruction (Graham et al., 2023). Providing students with models of writing to emulate and engaging them in prewriting activities also consistently improved outcomes, though the same review noted that secondary students currently receive limited opportunities to write in school, constraining the realization of these benefits (Graham et al., 2023).

Structured, evidence-based programs, including reciprocal teaching, guided reading, SQ3R, and graphic organizers, produce meaningful gains when mediated by trained teachers capable of adapting instruction responsively to their students (Lagdaan & Sevilla, 2025). Intensive mentoring models, such as the Reading to Learn pedagogy implemented in under-resourced Indonesian secondary schools, have similarly been shown to strengthen teachers' underlying literacy instruction capacity (Wirza et al., 2023). Across this literature, the strategies most consistently associated with positive outcomes share common features: explicit instruction, metacognitive modeling, guided practice, and sensitivity to students' cognitive and sociocultural profiles (Jakobson et al., 2022; Lagdaan & Sevilla, 2025).

Pedagogical Content Knowledge in Literacy Instruction

Shulman's Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) theory has been widely applied to explain how teachers translate subject-matter expertise into effective literacy instruction. König et al. (2022) empirically validated a three-dimensional model distinguishing content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and general pedagogical knowledge among pre-service teachers in Germany, confirming Shulman's conceptualization of PCK as an integration of content and pedagogy rather than either alone. In the EFL context, Aguye and Berlie (2024) found a moderately strong positive relationship between secondary teachers' PCK perceptions and their classroom implementation of reading strategies, although classroom observations in the same study revealed that many teachers still lacked basic competence in translating that knowledge into practice. Similarly, Almunawaroh and Steklács (2025) found that secondary EFL teachers' PCK, in interaction with their pedagogical beliefs, shaped whether their instructional material use leaned toward constructivist or more transmissive approaches.

Beyond individual studies, PCK has served both as an analytical lens for evaluating teacher competence and as a design framework guiding professional development in literacy and language instruction, with consistent findings that effective PCK requires explicit attention to instructional strategies, learner knowledge, and assessment practices (Aguye & Berlie, 2024; Pereira et al., 2021; West, 2023). This theoretical grounding supports the present study's use of PCK to explain not just *what*

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strategies secondary teachers use, but *why* they select and adapt particular approaches to enhance their students' literacy skills.

Barriers to Implementing Literacy Strategies

Despite the availability of evidence-based strategies, secondary teachers face substantial, overlapping barriers to their consistent implementation. A recurring theme across contexts is inadequate professional preparation: teachers report insufficient pre-service training in literacy pedagogy and limited skill in using reading assessments to guide instruction (Bhowmik & Kim, 2021; Rosano et al., 2025). In the Philippines specifically, junior high school teachers have expressed a strong need for further professional development in reading instruction, citing gaps in both pedagogical knowledge and assessment literacy (Rosano et al., 2025).

Resource constraints compound these preparation gaps. Teachers across multiple national contexts, including the Philippines, South Africa, and Tanzania, report a scarcity of authentic reading materials, forcing reliance on traditional or improvised teaching methods (Apiles, 2025; Fesi & Mncube, 2021; Msuya & Abdala, 2025). Time and workload pressures further complicate implementation; teachers frequently describe feeling pressured to cover extensive curricula within limited instructional periods, leaving little room for the sustained practice that strategies such as scaffolding or guided reading require (Apiles, 2025; Akmal et al., 2022). Student-level challenges, particularly limited vocabulary and wide variation in proficiency within a single classroom, further complicate teachers' efforts to apply strategies consistently (Ligudon & Ildefonso, 2022; Nurkamto et al., 2021).

Evidence Linking Strategies to Literacy Outcomes

Not every literacy strategy has the same weight of evidence behind it. Differentiated instruction is among the better-supported approaches, with experimental groups consistently outperforming controls across a wide range of settings; Jordan, Bahrain, the Philippines, and the United Arab Emirates all report similar patterns (Magableh & Abdullah, 2021; Saleh, 2021; Potot et al., 2023; Ma'youf & Aburezeq, 2022). In Jordan specifically, ANCOVA results showed differentiated instruction improved secondary reading comprehension scores, with above-average students benefiting the most (Magableh & Abdullah, 2021), while a Bahraini quasi-experiment found a similarly strong relationship between exposure to differentiated instruction and comprehension gains (Saleh, 2021).

Explicit reading strategy instruction shows a comparably strong evidence base, and here the pattern that stands out is who benefits most: not the already-strong readers, but the weaker ones. Ethiopian grade 11 students taught through the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach showed significant post-test gains over controls (Wendaferew & Damtew, 2023), and a large Dutch study of 801 students using regression discontinuity design found that less proficient readers gained the most from explicit strategy instruction in second-language academic reading (Yapp et al., 2021). Chinese university EFL students told a similar story after sixteen weeks of strategy training.

Scaffolding's evidence is a little messier. It clearly helps: peer scaffolding actually outperformed teacher-led scaffolding in one 300-student quasi-experiment (Herdiana & Munir, 2023), and combining scaffolded instruction with collaborative learning and self-assessment reduced reading anxiety while improving both comprehension and motivation (Ibrahim et al., 2023). But observational research complicates the picture: when Norwegian researchers watched second-grade teachers conduct guided reading sessions, they often found teachers simply supplying answers rather than the explicit decoding support that scaffolding is supposed to involve (Håland et al., 2021). This gap between the strategy as designed and the strategy as practiced may explain a striking null finding from a large-scale PIRLS 2021 path analysis: no significant association emerged between teachers' self-reported use of explicit reading strategy instruction or differentiated instruction and students' actual standardized reading scores (Bleukx et al., 2024). Taken together, this suggests that a strategy's name and its classroom reality do not always match, which is precisely the kind of gap a qualitative, teacher-account-based study like this one is positioned to examine.

Synthesis and Research Gap

Altogether, this literature confirms that (a) literacy underachievement remains a severe and persistent problem both globally and in the Philippines specifically; (b) secondary teachers employ a

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well-documented range of strategies to address literacy gaps, with varying degrees of quantitative support for their effectiveness; (c) Shulman's PCK theory offers a validated framework for understanding how teachers' knowledge shapes their instructional choices; and (d) teachers face substantial, cross-context barriers, training, resources, time, and student variability, that complicate strategy implementation. However, the majority of the strategy-effectiveness literature relies on quantitative or quasi-experimental designs that measure outcomes without capturing teachers' own accounts of how and why they select, adapt, or abandon particular strategies under real classroom constraints. This qualitative case study addresses that gap by exploring, in teachers' own words, the strategies secondary English teachers use to enhance their students' literacy skills.

Methodology

1. Research Design

This study employed a single bounded qualitative case study design to explore the strategies of secondary English teachers in enhancing the literacy skills of their students. A case study is considered "bounded" when the researcher draws a clear, defensible line around what does and does not belong to the case, by time, place, or group, so that the object of study remains a single, identifiable unit rather than an open-ended population (Yin, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, that boundary is drawn around a single school: Tambulig National High School, Tambulig District, with the eight English teachers employed there during the 2026 data collection period constituting the case's participants. Teachers outside this school, or teaching subjects other than English, fall outside the boundary and are not part of the case. This bounding matters methodologically because it allows the study to examine, in depth, how literacy strategies are enacted within one specific institutional context, its particular resources, student population, and school culture, rather than producing broad claims meant to generalize across schools.

A qualitative case study approach was appropriate here because it allows for an in-depth, contextualized understanding of how teachers experience, select, and adapt instructional strategies within this bounded setting, rather than measuring the effectiveness of predetermined strategies through experimental means. This design prioritizes teachers' own accounts and lived experiences, capturing the reasoning, constraints, and adaptations behind their instructional choices, which aligns directly with the study's aim of understanding not just what strategies teachers use, but why.

2. Research Participants

Table 1 *Demographic Profile of Participants*

Participant	Years of Teaching	Subject Area	Grade Level Taught	Highest Educational Attainment	Major/Field of Specialization
Teacher 1	8	English	Grade 7 and 8	Master's Units	English
Teacher 2	5	English	Grade 8	Bachelor's Degree	English
Teacher 3	10	English	Grade 9	Master's Degree	English
Teacher 4	5	English	Grade 10	Bachelor's Degree	English
Teacher 5	10	English	Grade 11 and 12	Master's Degree	Educational Management
Teacher 6	5	English	Grade 12	Master's Units	English
Teacher 7	9	English	Grade 7 & 8	Master's Degree	Social Studies
Teacher 8	6	English	Grade 9 & 10	Bachelor's Degree	Arts in English Language

This study involved eight (8) teachers handling English subjects at Tambulig National High School, Tambulig District, selected through purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (a) currently teaching English at the secondary level, (b) actively engaged in literacy instruction within their respective grade levels, and (c) at least three years of teaching experience. Participants' teaching experience ranged from 5 to 10 years, representing a range of instructional exposure from relatively early-career to more veteran teachers. The group also reflected varied educational backgrounds, with degrees ranging from Bachelor's Degree holders to those with Master's Units and completed Master's Degrees, and specializations spanning English, Educational Management, Social Studies, and Arts in English Language. Table 1 presents the detailed profile of the participants.

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3. Research Instrument

This study utilized a semi-structured interview guide as the primary research instrument to gather data from the participants. The interview guide was developed based on the specific research questions outlined in the study's objectives, with questions organized to correspond to the Input, Process, and Output stages of the conceptual framework: teacher background and student literacy needs, the specific strategies employed and the pedagogical content knowledge informing them, the challenges encountered in implementation, and the perceived outcomes of these strategies.

The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to pose a consistent set of core questions across all participants while retaining the flexibility to ask follow-up or probing questions based on participants' responses, enabling a deeper exploration of individual teachers' experiences and reasoning. To ensure content validity, the interview guide was reviewed and validated by a panel of three experts specializing in language, qualitative research, and educational research. Their feedback was incorporated to refine the clarity, relevance, and alignment of the questions with the study's objectives. Interviews were conducted in Cebuanong Binisaya to allow participants to express their thoughts and experiences more naturally and comfortably. Responses were subsequently transcribed verbatim and translated into English for analysis and reporting purposes.

4. Data Gathering Procedure

Prior to the conduct of the study, the researcher secured the necessary permissions from the DepEd Schools Division and the school principal of Tambulig National High School to conduct the study within the institution. Upon approval, the researcher coordinated with the identified participants to explain the purpose, scope, and procedures of the study, after which informed consent was obtained from each teacher prior to their participation. Data collection was conducted through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, scheduled in consideration of the participants' availability to minimize disruption to their teaching responsibilities and workload. Each interview was audio-recorded, with the participants' consent, to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the data gathered. Interviews were conducted in Cebuanong Binisaya to allow participants to respond more comfortably and naturally.

Following each interview, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and translated into English. To ensure the accuracy and trustworthiness of the data, member checking was employed: transcripts were returned to the respective participants for validation, allowing them to confirm, clarify, or revise their responses before the data proceeded to analysis. Data collection occurred over six months, from February 2026 to July 2026.

5. Data Analysis

The data gathered from the interviews were analyzed following Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) case study analysis procedure, which proceeded through four connected steps. First, the researcher engaged in familiarization, reading and re-reading the verbatim transcripts and their English translations to develop a working sense of each teacher's account before any formal coding began. Second, open coding was conducted manually: meaningful units of text, words, phrases, or full statements relevant to the study's five research questions were identified and labeled with short descriptive codes (for example, a teacher's mention of "scaffolding for struggling readers" was coded as a specific strategy, while a mention of "packed curriculum" was coded as a time-related barrier). AI-assisted tools supported the organization of these codes into an initial spreadsheet, but every code was checked back against the original transcript and confirmed by the researcher before being retained.

Third, related codes were grouped into broader categories through axial coding; for instance, individual codes such as "peer tutoring," "self-sourced materials," and "teacher collaboration" were grouped under the broader category of "coping mechanisms." These categories were then refined into the study's final themes, organized around the Input-Process-Output framework and its associated research questions. Fourth, in the interpretation stage, these themes were read against Shulman's (1986) PCK theory to understand not just what patterns existed across teachers' responses, but what those patterns suggested about how pedagogical judgment operates in this specific school context. Throughout this process, the researcher retained final decision-making authority over all coding and

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thematic interpretations; AI-assisted tools were limited to a supportive, organizational role, and all analytic judgments reflect the researcher's own engagement with the data.

6. Reflexivity

As English teachers themselves, the researchers approached this study with firsthand familiarity with the demands of literacy instruction and the realities of secondary English classrooms, which shaped both the depth of engagement with participants during interviews and the interpretation of their responses. This shared professional background afforded a degree of insider understanding that facilitated rapport and encouraged participants to speak candidly about their strategies and challenges.

Notably, one of the researchers is a teacher at Tambulig National High School, the same institution where the study was conducted. While this insider position provided valuable contextual knowledge of the school environment and eased access to participants, it also carried the potential for bias, particularly the risk of interpreting participants' responses through preexisting assumptions or professional familiarity rather than allowing themes to emerge strictly from the data. To manage this, the researchers engaged in continuous self-reflection throughout the data collection and analysis process, remaining conscious of their own positionality and actively setting aside personal assumptions about literacy instruction when coding and interpreting participants' responses. Member checking, in which transcripts were validated by the participants themselves, further served as a safeguard, ensuring that the researchers' interpretations remained grounded in participants' actual accounts rather than the researchers' own professional experiences or expectations.

7. Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to established ethical standards in the conduct of research involving human participants. Prior to data collection, formal approval was secured from the DepEd Schools Division and the school principal of Tambulig National High School, as previously discussed. Each participant was provided with a clear explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, and their role, after which written informed consent was obtained. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty or consequence to their employment or professional standing.

To protect participants' confidentiality, pseudonymous labels (Teacher 1 through Teacher 8) were used throughout the data collection, analysis, and reporting process in place of participants' actual names. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely and accessed only by the researchers, ensuring that participants' identities and responses remained protected throughout the study. Participants were also assured that their responses would be used solely for the purposes of this research and would not be shared with school administrators or used in any evaluative capacity.

Results

Literacy Needs and Teacher Background

Teachers described their students as entering the classroom with persistent literacy gaps, and identified their own professional background as a key resource for addressing these gaps. This input shaped, from the outset, the kinds of strategies teachers considered viable for their classrooms.

Weak Foundational Literacy Skills. Across all grade levels, teachers reported that students struggled with basic decoding, comprehension, and vocabulary, regardless of how many years they had already spent in school.

"Some cannot even decode words properly. They can read the words but they do not understand what they are reading" (Teacher 1).

"Most of my students are not readers. They do not read at home, and many of them do not have books" (Teacher 2).

"They cannot read complex texts. They cannot write well. Their vocabulary is limited" (Teacher 6).

The persistence of these deficits from Grade 7 through Grade 12 suggests that literacy gaps are not resolved by the ordinary progression through the curriculum; they accumulate rather than close. This is consistent with findings that a majority of Filipino learners fail to reach minimum reading proficiency benchmarks (Lagdaan & Sevilla, 2025; Librea et al., 2023), and it reframes what teachers

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are actually doing: not simply "teaching literacy strategies" to a grade-appropriate class, but continuously performing remediation that, in a better-resourced system, would have been completed earlier.

Teachers' Professional and Disciplinary Background. Participants' years of experience and field of specialization shaped how they approached literacy instruction, with teachers whose training lay outside English drawing on that background as an asset rather than a limitation.

"My background in Social Studies has taught me the importance of making learning relevant... I choose strategies and materials that connect literacy to their lives and experiences" (Teacher 7).

"I have a Master's degree in English, so I have a deep understanding of the subject matter" (Teacher 3).

This variation supports the study's use of Shulman's (1986) PCK theory, which holds that effective instruction results from the integration of content knowledge and pedagogical judgment rather than content expertise alone (König et al., 2022; Aguye & Berlie, 2024).

Altogether, these input conditions cannot be understood in isolation from each other: because the literacy gaps teachers described are severe and persistent across every grade level, teachers were effectively forced to develop strong pedagogical judgment regardless of their formal specialization in English. This may explain why Teachers 5 and 7, trained in Educational Management and Social Studies, respectively, did not describe themselves as disadvantaged relative to English-degree holders, but instead described distinct, relevance-driven approaches to the same problem. In a setting where literacy deficits are the norm rather than the exception, PCK at Tambulig NHS appears to be built as much through sustained classroom experience with struggling readers as through formal subject-matter training, a claim the subsequent themes bear out.

Strategies Employed to Enhance Literacy Skills

Given the severity and persistence of the literacy gaps described above, it is notable that teachers across different grade levels and specializations converged on a similar core set of strategies, suggesting these approaches function as a kind of shared, almost necessary response to the input conditions rather than idiosyncratic personal preferences.

Reading Comprehension Strategies. This was the most frequently cited category, encompassing structured frameworks and modeling techniques.

"I often use the pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading approach... I also use scaffolding, especially for struggling readers" (Teacher 1).

"I use the Question-Answer Relationship or QAR technique... I also use reciprocal teaching where they take turns being the teacher" (Teacher 3).

"I use the guided reading approach. I work with small groups of students at similar levels" (Teacher 7).

These findings align with prior research showing that explicit strategy instruction, scaffolding, and structured reading frameworks reliably improve secondary students' comprehension (Wendaferew & Damtew, 2023; Lagdaan & Sevilla, 2025). More importantly, the recurrence of scaffolding and structured, staged frameworks (pre/during/post-reading, QAR, guided reading) across teachers who otherwise use very different specific techniques suggests that *structure itself*, breaking a complex task into explicit, sequenced steps, is the underlying strategic principle teachers rely on to compensate for students' weak foundational skills, more so than any single named technique.

Writing and Vocabulary Strategies. Teachers paired reading instruction with structured writing processes and targeted vocabulary-building activities.

"I use process writing. I guide them through prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing" (Teacher 3).

"For vocabulary, I use context clues and word analysis" (Teacher 8).

This mirrors evidence that process-based writing instruction and vocabulary-focused activities meaningfully strengthen both writing performance and broader literacy outcomes (Graham et al., 2023). Altogether, the strategies described in this section are best understood not as a menu of independent techniques teachers selected from, but as a coherent instructional logic: staged, scaffolded structure

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applied consistently across reading, writing, and vocabulary instruction alike. This convergence across teachers of differing backgrounds suggests that the demands of the Tambulig NHS classroom, students with wide-ranging and often severe gaps, pushed teachers toward broadly similar structural solutions, even where their specific techniques and terminology differed. This sets up the more individualized layer of decision-making examined next: how teachers decide *when* and *how* to deploy this shared structural toolkit.

Influence of Pedagogical Content Knowledge on Strategy Selection

If the previous section showed *what* teachers do, this section addresses *why* they do it in the particular way they do, and here, the individualized character of teachers' professional judgment becomes more visible than the convergence noted above.

Adaptive, Context-Sensitive Judgment. Nearly all teachers described weighing the text, the students, and the classroom context before selecting a strategy.

"There is no one-size-fits-all strategy. I need to consider my students' needs, the content, and the context" (Teacher 8).

"Not all strategies work for all students. I have to consider the content I am teaching and the students I am teaching it to" (Teacher 1).

Developmental and Theory-Informed Adaptation. Teachers adjusted the complexity of strategies to match grade level, and a subset explicitly grounded their choices in learning theory.

"If I am teaching Grade 7, I use simpler language and more visual aids. If I am teaching Grade 8, I can introduce more challenging strategies" (Teacher 1).

"I know that reciprocal teaching is based on Vygotsky's theory of social learning, so I know it works best when students work together" (Teacher 3).

This pattern is consistent with prior applications of PCK theory to literacy instruction, which describe effective teaching as requiring explicit attention to instructional strategy, learner knowledge, and theoretical grounding rather than technique alone (Aguye & Berlie, 2024; Pereira et al., 2021). Altogether, what distinguishes teachers here is not *whether* they adapt strategies- all do- but the *depth* of the reasoning behind that adaptation. Teachers like Teacher 3, with graduate training in English, could name the theoretical basis for a technique's effectiveness, while others, such as Teachers 1 and 8, relied on accumulated classroom judgment without necessarily naming the underlying theory. Both forms of PCK led to active, responsive adaptation rather than static strategy use, suggesting that at Tambulig NHS, PCK operates along a spectrum from theory-articulated to experience-derived, but converges on the same practical outcome: strategies are continuously reshaped to fit the specific students in front of the teacher, not applied uniformly. This adaptive capacity, however, was not exercised freely; it was constantly negotiated against the constraints examined next.

Challenges Encountered and Coping Mechanisms

The adaptive judgment described above did not operate in a vacuum. Teachers exercised this judgment under real, recurring constraints, and the coping mechanisms they developed reveal as much about the school's institutional conditions as about individual teacher resourcefulness.

Student-Level and Systemic Barriers. The most commonly cited challenges were the wide range of student abilities within a single classroom and time pressure from a packed curriculum.

"I have students who are advanced readers sitting next to students who can barely read" (Teacher 1).

"Time is a big challenge. There is so much to cover in Grade 12" (Teacher 6).

"We do not have enough reading materials that are appropriate for their level" (Teacher 1).

These findings mirror documented barriers among secondary English teachers across multiple national contexts, including mixed-proficiency classrooms, time constraints, and inadequate instructional materials (Bhowmik & Kim, 2021; Msuya & Abdala, 2025; Apiles, 2025).

Collaborative and Resourceful Coping. Despite these constraints, teachers described actively sustaining instruction through collaboration and self-sourced materials rather than disengaging from the challenge.

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"I collaborate with other teachers. We share resources and strategies... I also use formative assessment to monitor student progress" (Teacher 7).
"I sometimes bring my own books or print reading materials from the internet when I can" (Teacher 1).

This resourcefulness reflects teachers' agency in the absence of adequate institutional support, echoing how educators in under-resourced settings often develop workaround practices through trial, collaboration, and personal initiative (Wirza et al., 2023).

Altogether, these barriers and coping mechanisms cannot be fully separated from the specific conditions of Tambulig National High School as a single, under-resourced secondary school. Where a well-resourced institution might address mixed-ability classrooms through leveled sections, dedicated remedial staff, or a stocked library, at Tambulig these pressures converge directly onto the individual classroom teacher, who must simultaneously diagnose the gap, design the workaround, and source the material, often from their own pocket or personal networks. Read this way, the coping mechanisms described here are not incidental workarounds but a structural feature of how literacy instruction functions in this setting: teacher resourcefulness is not a supplement to the system; it is substituting for parts of the system that are otherwise absent. This has direct implications for how the resulting outcomes should be interpreted.

Outcomes of Literacy Enhancement Strategies

Because teachers' strategies were implemented under the resource and time constraints described above, the improvements reported here reflect what teachers themselves observed and interpreted in their classrooms, not outcomes independently measured through student assessment data.

Improved Comprehension, Writing, and Confidence. Teachers most often reported visible improvement in students' comprehension, vocabulary, writing structure, and classroom participation.

"Those who were struggling before are now able to understand simple texts. Their vocabulary has improved, and they are more confident in participating in class discussions" (Teacher 1).
"They can analyze texts more deeply... write essays with clear arguments and evidence" (Teacher 5).

Uneven and Ongoing Progress. At the same time, most teachers qualified these observations, noting that the progress they perceived was gradual and did not extend equally to every student.

"The progress is slow, and not all students show the same improvement" (Teacher 1).
"Not all students show improvement. Some still struggle. But I believe that if I keep trying, eventually they will improve. It is a long process, but it is worth it" (Teacher 3).

Altogether, this pattern of perceived improvement alongside acknowledged unevenness is consistent with the same student-level and resource barriers identified earlier in this section. Teachers described their strategies as producing noticeable change for some students while leaving others still struggling, a pattern that, in their own accounts, tracked closely with the mixed-ability grouping, limited materials, and compressed instructional time discussed above. The "small wins" teachers repeatedly described- a student reading a paragraph with understanding for the first time, one student's growing confidence- were framed by teachers themselves as meaningful but partial progress rather than resolution of the underlying literacy gap. These perceptions are explored further in the Discussion in relation to the study's theoretical framework.

Discussion

This case study revealed that secondary teachers at Tambulig National High School enhance their students' literacy skills through a structured, adaptive process shaped by severe input constraints, converging strategic choices, individualized pedagogical judgment, and outcomes that are genuine but incomplete. Beyond confirming that this process occurs, the findings offer grounds to reconsider how Shulman's (1986) PCK theory and the broader literacy-strategy literature account for teacher practice under conditions of persistent, uncompensated resource scarcity.

Input Factors: PCK Built Through Necessity Rather Than Formal Specialization

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The literacy needs teachers described, comprehension and vocabulary deficits persisting from Grade 7 through Grade 12, echo the severity of the Philippine literacy crisis documented in the broader literature (Lagdaan & Sevilla, 2025; Librea et al., 2023). However, much of the existing PCK literature treats content-specific formal training as the primary predictor of strong pedagogical content knowledge (König et al., 2022; Aguye & Berlie, 2024). The Tambulig data complicate this assumption. Teachers 5 and 7, trained respectively in Educational Management and Social Studies rather than English, did not describe themselves as disadvantaged relative to their English-major colleagues; instead, they described distinct, relevance-driven adaptations built through sustained exposure to struggling readers. This suggests that in settings where literacy deficits are the norm rather than the exception, PCK may be as reliably produced by accumulated remedial classroom experience as by formal subject-matter credentialing, a possibility the current PCK literature, largely developed in contexts where content specialization is the norm, has not fully anticipated.

Strategies: Structure as a Compensatory Mechanism, Not Simply a Technique Choice

Teachers' reported strategies, structured reading frameworks, scaffolding, and staged writing processes, align with prior evidence that such approaches reliably improve secondary literacy outcomes (Wendaferew & Damtew, 2023; Graham et al., 2023). What the existing literature does not fully explain is why teachers across differing grade levels and specializations converged so consistently on *staged, sequenced structure* as the underlying principle, rather than distributing across the full range of documented literacy techniques. The Tambulig data suggest an answer specific to this context: because students' literacy gaps were severe and largely unaddressed by the time they reached secondary school, structure functioned less as a preferred pedagogical style and more as a compensatory mechanism, a way of making complex texts accessible to readers who had not yet developed the independent skills the curriculum assumed they already possessed. This reframes scaffolding and staged frameworks, typically presented in the literature as one strategy among several equally viable options (Lagdaan & Sevilla, 2025), as something closer to a structural necessity in under-resourced, remediation-heavy secondary contexts.

Pedagogical Content Knowledge: A Spectrum from Theory-Articulated to Experience-Derived

Teachers' adaptive and developmentally responsive strategy use is consistent with Shulman's (1986) conceptualization of PCK as an integration of content and pedagogy (König et al., 2022). The Tambulig data extend this model in one specific way: teachers exercised PCK along a visible spectrum. Some, such as Teacher 3, could explicitly name the theoretical basis for a strategy's effectiveness (invoking Vygotsky's social learning theory to justify reciprocal teaching); others, such as Teachers 1 and 8, arrived at equally responsive adaptations through accumulated classroom judgment without articulating an underlying theory. Both forms produced the same practical outcome, continuous, student-responsive strategy adaptation, suggesting that PCK's theoretical architecture and its practical enactment may be more loosely coupled than Shulman's original formulation implies. This is a modest but genuine extension worth testing in future research: that PCK's *effects* on classroom practice may be observable and consistent even where its *theoretical self-awareness* varies considerably among teachers.

Challenges and Coping: Teacher Resourcefulness as Substituting for System Infrastructure

The challenges teachers reported- mixed-ability classrooms, time constraints, and insufficient materials- mirror documented barriers among secondary English teachers internationally (Bhowmik & Kim, 2021; Msuya & Abdala, 2025). However, the coping mechanisms teachers described- self-sourcing materials, collaborating informally with colleagues- cannot be fully understood as supplementary resourcefulness layered on top of an otherwise functioning system. At Tambulig National High School, a single, under-resourced secondary school, these pressures converge directly onto the individual classroom teacher, who must diagnose the literacy gap, design the workaround, and

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source the material largely without institutional backing. Read this way, teacher resourcefulness is not merely a coping strategy in the conventional sense; it is functioning as a substitute for infrastructure, students remediated or not, according to what an individual teacher can personally supply. This suggests that literacy-strategy literature developed in settings with baseline institutional support (stocked libraries, leveled sections, remedial staff) may understate how much documented "best practices" depend on infrastructural conditions that cannot be assumed in comparable rural Philippine or Global South contexts.

Outcomes: The Ceiling Effect of Individual-Level Strategy Use

The outcomes teachers reported, improved comprehension, writing, and confidence, are broadly consistent with evidence that explicit strategy instruction and differentiated instruction produce measurable literacy gains in experimental settings (Magableh & Abdullah, 2021; Yapp et al., 2021). It is worth being precise about what this study can and cannot claim, however: because these outcomes come from teachers' own perceptions rather than independent student assessment data, they should be read as evidence of what teachers believe is happening in their classrooms, not as confirmed measures of student achievement. Within that limitation, the near-universal qualification that this perceived progress was slow and uneven is still worth treating as a substantive finding rather than a footnote. It suggests that individual teacher strategy use, however well-adapted and theoretically grounded, may have real limits when it operates without corresponding change in the resource and time conditions surrounding it. The "small wins" teachers described, a single student reading a paragraph with understanding for the first time, are framed by teachers themselves not as modest achievements despite otherwise strong instruction, but as evidence that classroom-level strategy work alone struggles to fully close the gap absent broader investment in materials, staffing, or instructional time. This tempers how the effectiveness literature on individual strategies (Graham et al., 2023; Magableh & Abdullah, 2021) should be read in under-resourced secondary contexts: strong experimental evidence that a strategy works does not, on its own, tell us whether the surrounding system gives that strategy room to fully work.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, it is concluded that secondary English teachers at Tambulig National High School enhance their students' literacy skills through a structured, adaptive process shaped by persistent input constraints, converging strategic choices, and individualized pedagogical judgment. These teachers work with students who carry significant literacy gaps in comprehension, vocabulary, and writing that persist across grade levels, drawing on both their formal training and accumulated classroom experience to inform their instructional choices. In response, they employ a broad but convergent repertoire of strategies, structured reading frameworks, scaffolding, staged writing processes, and vocabulary-building activities, selected and adapted through pedagogical content knowledge that ranges from theory-articulated to experience-derived judgment. Despite facing recurring challenges, mixed-ability classrooms, time constraints, and insufficient instructional materials, teachers sustain their practice through resourcefulness: collaborating informally with colleagues, sourcing their own materials, and continuously adjusting strategies based on what they observe working in the classroom. Teachers themselves perceived real improvement in their students' comprehension, writing, and confidence as a result of these efforts, though they consistently described this progress as slow and uneven rather than complete, a pattern that, in their accounts, appeared closely tied to the same resource and time constraints discussed throughout this study.

As a single-case study situated in one secondary school and grounded in teachers' own perceptions rather than independently measured student outcomes, these findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable; rather, they offer an analytically transferable account of how secondary English teachers in similarly resource-constrained Philippine settings navigate the enhancement of their students' literacy skills. Teachers' resourcefulness and sustained commitment reflect their dedication to their students' literacy development despite considerable structural constraints. This study suggests, tentatively, that such dedication, while clearly valuable at the level of the individual classroom, may be

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better sustained and extended with corresponding institutional support in the form of instructional materials, staffing, and time, though confirming this would require further research that includes direct measures of student outcomes. Beyond documenting local practice, this study's framework, linking teacher input, adaptive strategy, pedagogical content knowledge, and perceived outcomes, offers a starting point for understanding how literacy instruction unfolds under sustained resource scarcity, a dynamic that existing literacy-strategy literature, largely developed in better-resourced settings, has yet to fully capture.

Knowledge Contribution

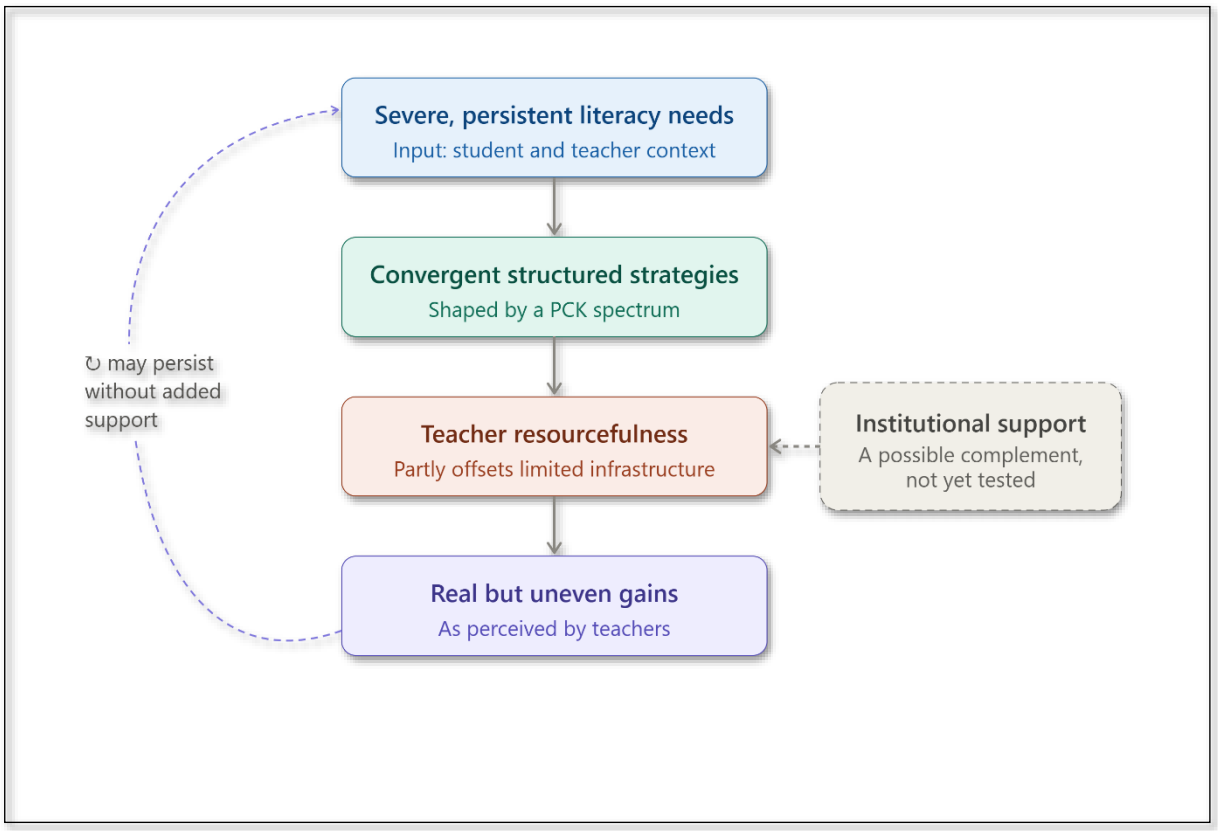


Figure 2. Teacher-Level Compensation Model of Secondary English Teachers' Literacy Enhancement Strategies

Figure 2 presents a tentative model derived from this study's findings, illustrating how teachers' literacy enhancement efforts unfold under conditions of persistent resource scarcity. The model suggests that severe, persistent literacy needs among secondary students, combined with teachers' varied professional backgrounds, appear to drive teachers toward a convergent set of structured strategies, shaped by a spectrum of pedagogical content knowledge ranging from theory-articulated to experience-derived judgment. In the absence of institutional infrastructure, teachers' resourcefulness appears to substitute, at least in part, for missing resources, time, and support. Teachers themselves perceived this process as producing real but uneven gains, improvement in students' comprehension, writing, and confidence that nonetheless did not extend equally to every student. Without additional institutional support, this pattern, as teachers described it, seems likely to persist rather than resolve on its own, as reflected in the feedback loop returning to the same literacy needs at the model's starting point.

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This model's contribution lies in offering one possible explanation, grounded in teachers' own accounts, for why individual classroom effort alone may not be enough to fully close secondary literacy gaps: it suggests that institutional support may function as an important complement to teacher effort, rather than an optional add-on, though this remains a hypothesis generated by a single case study and would need to be tested through further research involving multiple school contexts and, ideally, independent measures of student literacy outcomes.

Recommendation

1. Institutionalize the Structured Reading and Writing Frameworks Teachers Have Independently Converged On. The school administration and the Department of Education (DepEd) Schools Division should consider formally recognizing and supporting the staged, scaffolded strategies (pre/during/post-reading approaches, guided reading, process writing) that teachers at Tambulig National High School reported using across grade levels. Providing shared templates, training, and materials for these frameworks may reduce the individual preparation burden currently carried by each teacher and help ensure greater consistency across the English department.
2. Develop PCK-Building Support for Teachers Outside Formal English Specialization. Since this study found that teachers without English degrees (e.g., those with backgrounds in Educational Management or Social Studies) described developing strong pedagogical content knowledge through classroom experience, the school may consider establishing structured mentoring or peer-learning arrangements that formally support this experience-based PCK development, rather than assuming only content-degree holders can teach literacy effectively.
3. Establish a School-Based Literacy Materials Bank. The insufficiency of reading materials appropriate to students' levels was a recurring barrier described by participants. The school, in coordination with the DepEd Schools Division, may consider establishing a shared, continuously updated repository of leveled reading materials, which could reduce teachers' current reliance on self-sourced or personally funded materials.
4. Explore Structural Options for Addressing Mixed-Ability Grouping. Because differentiating instruction for wide-ranging student abilities within a single classroom was consistently described as difficult to manage alone, the school may wish to explore structural interventions such as leveled sectioning, formalized peer-tutoring programs, or dedicated remedial periods, so that differentiation is not left entirely to individual teacher effort.
5. Consider Protecting Instructional Time for Literacy Activities Within the Curriculum. Given that teachers across all grade levels identified curriculum time pressure as a persistent barrier, the school and DepEd may consider allocating protected instructional time for literacy-focused activities, so that reading and writing instruction are less frequently compressed by pressure to cover other curricular content.
6. Recognize and Support Teacher Collaboration as a Formal Practice. Teachers' informal collaboration and resource-sharing functioned as an important coping mechanism in this study. The school may consider providing dedicated time, such as a regular department meeting period, to formalize and sustain this collaboration rather than relying solely on teachers' voluntary initiative.
7. Treat Institutional Support as a Potentially Valuable Complement to Teacher Effort. As this study's knowledge contribution model tentatively suggests, teacher-level strategy use alone may face real limits in producing consistent literacy outcomes. DepEd and school administrators may wish to consider institutional investment, materials, staffing, and structural support as a potentially important complement to individual teacher effort, recognizing that this study's design does not allow this relationship to be confirmed with certainty.
8. Conduct Further Research on the Teacher-Level Compensation Model in Other Under-Resourced Schools, Using Direct Measures of Student Outcomes. Future research should examine whether the patterns identified in this study, the convergence toward structured strategies, the experience-derived development of PCK among non-specialist teachers, and teachers' perception of uneven progress, hold in other rural or under-resourced secondary schools across the Philippines.

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Incorporating direct, independent measures of student literacy outcomes, rather than relying solely on teacher perception, would help test the broader transferability of this study's model.

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